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ABSTRACT

Silence functions as a unique form of interpersonal communication and should be presented to students of communication as such. Scholars recognize silence as an important, independent feature of interpersonal communication and significant enough to warrant examination. However, the study of silence (and other nonverbal communication forms) as an independent communication form is in its infancy. The general view is that silence has many possible meanings that can run along a continuum which encompasses both desirable and undesirable ends. Different cultures and different societies have variable attitudes, values, and standards that they apply to the use of silence. The applications of silence stretch across a broad spectrum of interpersonal interaction and behaviors. The field of silence and the study of that broad area are both constantly expanding. (Twenty-eight notes are included.) (RS)

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"Silence Please--Silence as a Component of Interpersonal Communication"

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"Silence Please--Silence as a Component of Interpersonal Communication"

One aspect of communication that has received insufficient attention is silence. Silence functions as a unique form of interpersonal communication, and should be presented to students of communication as such. Silence is employed in many ways in the interpersonal interaction process. Silence is an important element in the production of interpersonal meaning. This paper attempts to provide an overview of silence as a form of interpersonal communication. The paper examines the general notion of silence as a form of interpersonal interaction, various meanings associated with the use of silence, socio-cultural aspects of silence, and specific applications of silence.

Richard Johannesen has noted that"....a person cannot NOT communicate. Hence silence communicates because listeners and observers will attach meaning to the silence whether the sender wishes so or not."[1] He is saying that people cannot NOT communicate--it is simply impossible. No matter how hard we might try, we are always communicating. Our very silence is communication--we are "saying something by saying nothing." More importantly, others receive that communication whether we intend for them to do so or not. Indeed, it has been suggested that the classic Lassellian model should be modified to read: "Who says (or does not say) what, to whom, when, in what manner, under what circumstances, with what effect?"[2] Again, the idea is this: we simply cannot stop communicating by stopping talking, silence is itself a form of interpersonal communication.

Why should silence be examined? The answer was perhaps best explained by Condon who said: "Like anything else of value, language is best used when it is best understood."[3] In other words, simply because silence can be identified as a form of interpersonal communication,

we should strive to better understand it, in order to maximize our overall interpersonal communication.

Scholars recognize silence as an important, independent feature of interpersonal communication and significant enough to warrant examination. Professor Barnland has said that "silence must be recognized as a communicative act in its own right...."[4] Others have noted that it is "not unusual that what is not said is as important or more important than what is said."[5] Indeed, some have gone so far as to say that "a sensitivity to silences is imperative to two-way communication."[6] That may be a bit hyperbolic, but it does underscore the notion that silence is inherent to interpersonal communication and that we should be more aware of it.

"One human attaches meaning to the silence of another human being," according to Johannesen, "because it is assumed that thought processes are occurring. Human silence is pregnant with reasoning because of this assumption."[7] Silence is interpersonal communication because by being silent we cause others to assign some meaning to that silence, just as we cause others to assign meaning to our choice of words, gestures, and other traditional modes of communication. Indeed, as we shall note later, there are a virtually unlimited number of meanings that could be attached to an act of silence.

It should be noted that the study of silence as an independent interpersonal communication form is still largely in its infancy. "The study of nonverbal communication is relatively recent. For a long time people felt that, unless words were involved, communication did not take place."[8] This is especially pertinent for silence. There is "relatively little empirical research or focused speculative investigation.....concerning the functioning of silence in the normal, everyday, human communication process."[9] This preface is necessary to make it clear

that much of what is being discussed here is speculative not only for this writer, but for authorities in the field. Such a setting makes it all that more appropriate to further the investigation and examination of silence as an interpersonal communication form.

As Johannesen has noted, silence can denote a variety of different meanings. "Silence," notes Farr, "can be reassuring, comforting, questioning or even stimulating...."[10] In other words, when silence is employed it can be used to communicate a large number of meanings. It would be useful to examine the numerous meanings associated with silence that have been established by other scholars. Such an examination is in no way to be considered comprehensive, it is simply to be suggestive of the wide spectrum of meanings that can be attached to silence.

Johannesen, produced a list of twenty potential meanings of one's use of silence. This list includes:

> (1) The person lacks sufficient information to talk on the topic. (2) the person feels no sense of urgency about talking. (3) The person is carefully pondering exactly what to say next. (4) The silence may simply reflect the person's normal rate of thinking. (5) The person is avoiding discussion of a controversial or sensitive issue out of fear. (6) The silence expresses agreement. (7) The silence expressed disagreement. (8) The person is doubtful or indecisive. (9) The person is bored. (10) The person is uncertain of someone else's meaning...."[11]

The other ten suggested meanings are all means by which meaning is conveyed in interpersonal interaction. Johannesen's list is lengthy, but not exhaustive. The scope of silence in interpersonal communication is obviously significant.

Gail and Michele Myers have identified eleven distinctly different meanings that could be attached to silence. These include silence which denotes that we are terribly angry or

frustrated, silence which occurs when we are attentively listening to a speaker, a silence of boredom, and the silence which occurs when we cannot think of a thing to say.[12]

Some authorities tend to assign more limited value or meaning to silence. In fact, there are those who view silence in a completely negative light. Don Fabus has said:

> The world of silence may be a cold and bitter one: like the deep wastes of the Arctic regions, it is for neither man nor beast. Holding one's tongue may be prudent, but it is an act of rejection; silence builds walls--and walls are the symbols of failure.[13]

An interpretation of silence along such lines ignores all potentially positive aspects of silence and assumes that positive meanings inherently require the use of words. It is extremely easy to find examples of the positive meaning of silence in those suggested by Johannesen or Myers and Myers. For instance, Myers and Myers note that silence could mean that one is attentively listening. Besides the inherent worth of attentive listening, it also helps to create a more supportive climate for interpersonal communication. There are others who embrace silence as positive. Max Picard put it this way, "Silence is nothing merely negative; it is not the mere absence of speech. It is a positive, a complete world in itself."[14]

In general, a relatively balanced view towards silence seems typical and most appropriate. Scheidel's simple statement that "silence can communicate, both constructively and destructively," seems to be the norm.[15] The general view would be that silence has many possible meanings that can run along a continuum which encompasses both desirable and undesirable ends. The important point is that there is no one single meaning or interpretation that can be associated with the use of silence. Such variety becomes more important and more relevant when we examine the socio-cultural aspects of silence.

Different cultures and different societies have variable attitudes, values and standards that they apply to the use of silence. The norms surrounding contemporary American society and the use of silence are obviously most important to our examination of American interpersonal communication, but it is nonetheless important to discuss the use of silence in other socio-cultural settings. When we have examples of other culture's uses of silence to contrast and compare to our own, we can perhaps better understand why we use silence in the way we do.

True Americans, American Indians, have traditionally placed a high value upon silence.

> Most American Indian tribes viewed silence as a worthwhile element in the human communication process. Silence reflected reverence for careful language usage; words were not to be used profusely or promiscuously. Silence facilitated effective listening. One derived from silence, the cornerstone of character, the virtues of self-control, courage, patience and dignity.[16]

Such a reverence has not held true for those who came later to America and have come to dominate it culturally.

Eastern cultures have also traditionally placed a high value upon silence. Most oriental cultures can be counted among those "societies [who] cultivate the practice of 'communing' in silence."[17] The contrast between Eastern and Western culture in regard to silence was perhaps best noted by the complaint of a Vietnamese student in an intercultural communication course. The student said that "For people who come from placid cultures where nonverbal language is more used, and where a silence, a smile, a glance have their own meaning, it is true that Americans speak a lot."[18]

It is indeed true that "Americans speak a lot." Our culture tends to place a great emphasis upon verbal communication and to downplay the role of silence. "In spite of a few wise sayings ("silence is golden," or "one picture is worth a thousand words"); we value

glibness, praise a 'gift of gab,' and consider silence in many social situations a weakness. In groups, silent members are more often than not perceived as the least influential members of the group."[19] Americans have gone so far as to characterize silence as a form of punishment:

> In our society, however, silence is not necessarily golden. In fact, it often creates great inner tension. Not uncommonly we penalize or punish one another by according the 'silent treatment.' Frequently parents use silence to punish children by seeming to withdraw attention and, therefore (in the child's eyes), affection; and children in turn, employ silence to register their rebellion.[20]

We are all well aware of situations which we frequently encounter in contemporary American society which place an emphasis upon vocal activity and downplay the value of silence. Quite often when we are dating we feel compelled to make "small talk," to say anything that will prevent silence from prevailing. The motivation seems to be fear--fear that our silence will be interpreted as something negative; dislike, boredom and so forth. There also seems to be a very high premium placed upon vocal activity in social settings such as parties and dinners. Again, the notion seems to be that we should constantly say something in order to avoid engendering any doubts about our meaning.

There are situations in our society which tend to dictate a norm of silence. For instance, "some religious groups encourage periods of silence and group meditation: each individual may reflect quietly, and there is no need for speech."[21] It is common for emphasis to be placed upon silence in several religiously related areas: funeral homes, churches, and the like. There are other areas, such as libraries and museums, which prompt us to stress silence over sound. Most all of these examples are, however, exceptions to the rule. The general tendency in American society is to value the vocal and avoid the silent.

There are probably as many possible applications that can be made of silence as there are meanings. Before discussing some of the more mundane, yet probably more important, day-to-day applications of silence, a few unique applications will be considered.

One interesting application of silence is in relation to use by public speakers, especially political candidates. A speaker can analyze his audience and select certain matters to remain silent about and thus communicate a certain idea or view through the act of being silent. Silence can also be utilized along such lines as a way of making your audience draw their own conclusions, without explicit, verbal guidance. McGianis explained it like this:

> What the candidate fails to say can be more important than what he does say. Audiences should be stimulated to supply their own interpretations of gaps left by what is unsaid, they should be led to the brink of an idea, but not pushed across it. A basic axiom is offered: 'Its not the words, but the silence where votes lie.'[22]

Additionally, stimulation through silence is not limited to the audience. The speaker may also be stimulated or at least affected by silence on the part of the audience. An example would be the reaction of George Wallace:

> Wallace apparently needed audience response, even insult and heckling to stimulate his aggressive speaking. In Wheeling, West Virginia, students simply held aloft black placards of mourning in silent protest. It baffled Wallace, silence always baffled him.[23]

Another unique application of silence can be found in the use of a specific form of silence; the pause. A pause is a form of silence that one can utilize to help emphasize meaning and expression. This notion has been explained by Aggertt and Bowen:

> A pause is, of course, the absence of sound, but do not confuse a pause and a hesitation. A hesitation is accidental, 'dead' silence that communicates nothing. A pause is purposeful, 'living' silence that is charged with meaning. A good

> pause anticipates, reinforces, emphasizes, and thrusts home meaning. During the pause, both the reader and the listener think, feel, experience, and appreciate.[24]

Although Aggertt and Bowen are writing as instructors of oral interpretation, their explanation of the pause can be applied in several ways. Any mode of communication may utilize pausing in the same way as the person performing oral interpretation would. In interpersonal communication, we can obviously utilize pausing to help express and emphasize our meanings. In the interpersonal sphere, the pause can perform all the functions associated with the general use of silence.

A more directly interpersonal use of silence can be found in the application of silence to the business setting. It has been suggested that managers and other businessmen could utilize silence for a variety of ends:

> (1) To encourage subordinates to think problems through before giving answers.....(2) To encourage and permit subordinates to express themselves fully....and (3) To increase the probability of uncovering emotionally loaded information.[25]

Such application applies to any communication between individuals, whether they are managers and subordinates or two very close friends. In other words, such applications would seem to be generic to interpersonal communication. Consider the idea of stimulating the thought process:

> ....if the subordinate reacts strongly to silence, won't he leap in with his first hasty idea just to break the silence? Not if he's worth his salt. If the silence isn't broken--and if it's clear that the manager isn't going to break it--the subordinate will usually try to come up with the best solution he can think of. He is under stress, a condition which causes many people to think better and faster.[26]

In normal day-to-day communication we can encourage others to think more clearly by providing them with the motivation that silence can produce.

Day-to-day applications of silence are too numerous to discuss in any comprehensive manner. Suffice it to say that one could apply silence in any of the numerous ways that meaning can be expressed through silence. In other words, the potential and actual day-to-day applications of silence are as numerous as the potential meanings of silence. For instance, one could use silence to demonstrate boredom or conversely, to demonstrate attentive listening. Although redundant with the discussion of the meanings contained in an act of silence, the point is worth stressing, that silence can be applied in any interpersonal situation as a means of communicating many meanings.

Silence clearly plays a large role in interpersonal communication. It can serve several independent functions, and enhance other communication forms such as gestures and other traditional non-verbal actions. Silence can convey many different meanings, both positive and negative. The role of silence, much like all interpersonal communication, varies according to culture and society. The applications of silence stretch across a broad spectrum of interpersonal interaction and behaviors. There are several ways to study silence and to teach others about it.[27] The field of silence and the study of that broad area are both constantly expanding.[28] This paper represents a small heuristic and practical effort in that field.

NOTES

[1] Robert L. Johannesen, "The Functions of Silence: A Plea for Communication Research," Western Speech Journal (1974): 29.

[2] Ibid., p. 29.

[3] John C. Condon, Jr., Semantics and Communication (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), p. 12.

[4] Dean C. Barnlund, Interpersonal Communication: Survey and Studies (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 530.

[5] William D. Brooks, Speech Communication (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1974), p. 174.

[6] Gail E. Myers and Michele Tolela Myers, The Dynamics of Human Communication (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 170.

[7] Johannesen, p. 25.

[8] Myers and Myers, p. 167.

[9] Johannensen, p. 25.

[10] James N. Farr, "How to Communicate with Silence," Nation's Business, June 1962, p. 96.

[11] Johannensen, p. 28-29.

[12] Myers and Myers, pp. 168-169.

[13] Don Fabun, in Communication: Concepts and Processes, ed., Joseph A. Devito, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 132-133.

[14] Max Picard, in Communication: Concepts and Processes, p. 133.

[15] Thomas M. Scheidel, Speech Communication and Human Interaction (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1972), p. 105.

[16] Johannsen, p. 27.

[17] Scheidel, p. 105.

[18] La Ray M. Barna, "Intercultural Communication Stumbling Blocks," in Intercultural Communication: A Reader, eds. Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1976), p. 292.

[19] Myers and Myers, p. 167.

[20] Scheidel, p. 105.

[21] Ibid., p. 105.

[22] Joe McGinnis, The Selling of the President 1968 (New York: Pocket Books, 1969), p. 187.

[23] George Lardner and Jules Loh, "The Wonderful World of George Wallace," Esquire, LXXI (May 1969), p. 110.

[24] Otis J. Aggertt and Elbert R. Bowen, Communicative Reading (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1972), p. 233.

[25] Farr, p. 96.

[26] Ibid, p. 96.

[27] See, for example; Jim Crocker, "Nine Instructional Exercises to Teach Silence." Communication Education (1980), p. 72-77.

[28] The most recent text on the subject is Alan Jaworski's The Power of Silence (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992).